

October 1, 2021
Barry University Chapel of the Cor Jesu
Funeral Homily: Steffano Montano
Fr. Faustino Cruz

May the Lord give you peace.

I am Tito Cruz, dean of the graduate school of religion at Fordham University, Steffano's academic home. On behalf of our president, Fr. Joseph McShane, SJ, our students, faculty, and staff, I would like to express our condolences to Steffano's family, especially to Christina his spouse, and to Malaya, his daughter. To Gabriel, his brother, and to his parents, los Senores Jose y Lourdes Montano. Pesame.

You have lost a husband, a father, a brother, a son--a friend--in the prime of his life.
It's hard to imagine your grief.

Yet, as painful and devastating that loss is for you, our Christian faith tells us

that Steffano's life is changed, not ended, even in death. That is what I would like to speak about now, using the spiritual exercises of Jesus' Beatitudes, a way toward ultimate blessedness, that we have just proclaimed in Matthew's gospel.

The Beatitudes are hard to explain.

While they move from loss to gain, they evoke so much beauty.

The beauty that we saw in Steffano—a beautiful smile, a beautiful heart, a beautiful mind--the beauty the we are called to see in each one of us.

The first beatitude speaks about poverty.

It challenges us to face the fact that nothing of this earth satisfies or is permanent.

I think Steffano deeply understood this.

Do you agree?

His health was very poor—

no doctor,

no medication could save him.

But his sickness didn't destroy him,

did it?

On September 9,

Steffano convened a group of doctoral students by Zoom from his hospital bed at the Westchester Medical Center in NY, in what was to be his "last lecture."



While he had only spent a total of 4 hours with them this semester, he undoubtedly had such a profound impact on their personal, spiritual, and pastoral lives. He inspired them with his vision—
his image of a new creation—
which was to build a more just and inclusive, anti-racist society.

Their response? Grief.

Grief that is rooted in joy-filled gratitude to Steffano for his passion and commitment to his students. They were absolutely in awe.

One of his students said, “I have been a teacher for many years, and I know colleagues who miss school because of a hangover. And look at Steffano, he said—
telling us at that end of that session, “yes, I’ll still be in the hospital, but I’ll see you all next week.” Spoken with so much hope from his hospital bed.

Another student said, “I don’t understand, but I simply cannot stop praying for him; he has been in my prayers since I heard of his passing.”

Clearly, with his students, he had already formed a beloved community. Jeniffer Wowor, a Protestant minister and educator based in Jogjakarta, Indonesia wrote via email, “I knew that Dr. Montano struggled with pain in teaching, but his eyes were always shining. Although he is no longer with us, I’m sure that the light still shines, in his profound commitments to the path of liberation and equality, in the lives of those who knew him, and in his wife and daughter’s heart. He also encouraged me to find my own authentic “light,” and I hope my future students will also be able to see it in my eyes.”

Steffano’s wife Christina said that for him, teaching at Fordham was transformative; it was a lifeline. That is why he was filled with sadness when he could not go to El Paso for a border teach-in on migration with a group of undergrads. Flying would not have been good for his lungs. But that didn’t stop him from planning the trip. He even funded it by unabashedly going from door to door, convincing Fordham administrators to contribute to his cause.

I said, Steffano, how long have you been here? Two months? And you have already raised hundreds of dollars? Then you should be the dean.

Yet, there was something innately humble in Steffano; it was never about him. He knew his limits; he knew when to let go. He was keenly aware of his vulnerability— realizing that he could not change anything without the graciousness of God in Christ.

That is why he was always seeking wholeness, by helping others embrace all of who they were, their family of origin, their memories, their bodies, their beauty--their voice. This was the curriculum, the theory and practice, of his vocation as a teaching scholar.

And as a result, how did he treat others? With mercy and compassion. Christina said that Steff was one of the kindest persons she had ever met— that people would open up to him because he had this kind and nonjudgmental presence that made them feel comfortable.

Steffano's mercy for others was undoubtedly grounded in his health struggles— having to learn how to embrace all of who he was, in sickness and in health. When he was successful at that, it was something to behold.

“Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.” Felices los de Corazon limpio, porque veran a Dios.

Imam Shady Alshorman of the Islamic Center of Clermont, here in Florida, posted on his community facebook that he had never met anyone as supportive, charismatic, handsome, unique, and blessed as his beloved professor. In his prayer, he invoked “May Allah have mercy upon him and make it easy for his family.”

Finding God in all of creation was what made Steffano such a balm to the spirit. He was a natural peacemaker, a reconciler— he was the kind of leader that people followed. Why? Because he was willing to have conversations that others might shy away from.

Having someone on the faculty who could actually name what had to be named was affirming, challenging, and transforming. He was a change-maker and a relationship-builder.

However, as the Beatitudes tell us, there's always a struggle. The Beatitudes call it persecution, but it can be any form of obstacle along the way that we all experience.

For Steffano, it was poor health; for some of us, it might be sorrow, grief, or dissatisfaction, for others, it could be loneliness, powerlessness, or lack of purpose. But that's only the first part of the Beatitudes.

Steffano has successfully passed through those beatitudes toward the beatific vision— the state of being blissfully happy. Therefore, like a good teacher, he instructs us to follow him. To not let our limits or losses, eclipse our capacity to long and hope for something better, for something more life-giving— for a beatitude.

So, let us

Be that certain wholeness of spirit by embracing all of who we are.

Be that who shows compassion, and care, and mercy to the brokenhearted among us.

Be that passionate single hearted vision of what really matters, and of something that we can pour our entire life blood into.

Be that who proclaims peace and justice in a world overcome by chaos, confusion, and strife.

That is what Steffano is and always will be—

a beautiful beatitude to you and me.

Someone who calls me beyond the burdens of my body,

my age, my sickness, my smallness,

my losses, my grief.

Steffano, in his new life in Christ,

calls each one of us to be all that God calls us to be. Steffano, rejoice and be glad! Alegrate!

Steffano's great reward in heaven? He had begun living it with us on earth— by knowing intimately the risen Christ that lived--.

Through him,
with him,
and in him.